The sudden emergence of COVID-19, in all of its stark reality and un-dismissable-ness, activated still strong memories from a year ago. The similarities are so very like my cancer journey, when I was forced to face mortality, appreciate my health, and was helped to step into a tomorrow that would never again be like yesterday.

I Can’t Understand

Cancer is a big word for only having two syllables. My diagnosis of lung cancer was delivered by those who knew, giving me the technical details, the causes, and the consequences, but not the why. It was uncovered by a fluke visit to the ER with what turned out to be the flu. An x-ray to rule out pneumonia had shown a glimpse of “Lucky” as my Stage 1 nodule came to be named. Cancer in me—a vegetarian non-smoker, a church-worker whose main vices include chocolate and caffeine—where’s the rhyme or reason in that? I’m happy to accept consequences, but for breathing?

My family and friends quickly rallied into “Team Julie.” Surgery was scheduled—no waiting around. Medical appointments filled my days so fully that I barely had time to realize what was happening. I made space for time away from work. I wrapped up loose ends. I finalized a new will. I peered into the deep abyss of mortality and recognized myself as points of Light and Love—wrapped in pure Peace. So simple, yet so profound.

And then it was over—the tests, the surgery, and the hospitalization. “Your lung has healed perfectly,” said the surgeon, admiring his work. My friend Linda told me that it was a prayer come true, and I corrected her: “You mean a dream come true.” “No Julie, prayer, definitely a prayer,” she said.

My recovery was a time of complete letting go and allowing others to care for me. My family was there at every turn. Friends arrived with food. Flowers and more flowers, filling my home with fragrance, color and hope for spring. My goal was to be able to go to church for Easter, just two weeks post-surgery, and I was blessed to make it (even though I slept the whole afternoon). Others “walked” me back to health with “you can do it” and “just a little bit more.”

I dipped my toes into the River of Receiving, which felt fabulous. I had been lucky enough to be invited to the dance with mortality, but now I was ready to get off the stage. I was healed, but life was never going to feel normal again.
I Don’t Understand

Cancer slapped my heart the hardest as I worked to excavate the unsaid and unexplainable. Cancer had provided the landscape for my journey, but not the destination. My entire life in the largely logical financial and accounting world was one of finding solutions to whatever was presented. The infrastructure of Julie was dissolving as I tried to come up with answers for why this had happened to me. How did I get so lucky as to find an asymptomatic cancer still at Stage 1? I remembered Paul’s words, “Who can know the mind of God?” But that wasn’t enough. I felt like the flip side of the Book of Job. Like Job, I wanted to ask God to explain it to me, to know where the logic takes us.

I needed to get something off my chest—more than just the lung cancer. I was convinced that I should be able to understand why this had happened. Some suggested that I become an advocate for clean air and environmental change. My attorney suggested that I seek class-action lawsuit representation. I was getting nowhere—the former Julie was not the post-cancer Julie. Where were the answers? What are the questions? I was drifting—Julie living, but not grounded. Julie in limbo.

I Will Never Understand

I visit the cancer center these days with my regularly scheduled lung scans and meet with my oncologist, who informs me that she will remain the point person for my health moving forward, perhaps for the rest of my life.

What I cling to now are phrases that appeared over the months and stick with me as I ponder: Be mindful, but not afraid. Don’t thrum the strings of anxiety. Be fierce, but with gentleness. Use all of your courage today, you’ll get more tomorrow.

I’ve been working to find my voice—connections to it wax and wane as I travel the maze of a new chapter in life. My voice is strong; my voice is choked.

Perhaps there’s a sound that will come shrieking out, anger and sadness fused as one. Perhaps there’s a song, a sweet lyric piece that floats above the confusion and delivers the harmony of peace and truth.

Perhaps there’s an out-pouring of love and gratitude—valentines formed by the tongue. Whatever comes, I am resolved to the knowledge that good or bad cancer outcome, my lesson learned is the same.

Sola Gratia

Grace is the opposite of karma, which is all about getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve.

It turns out that Grace is a bigger word than cancer (and at only one syllable). And in response, only one prayer is necessary. “Thank you, God.”

Julie Champ serves as the Director of Finance & Administration at Westminster Presbyterian Church and is keenly passionate about all things money, coining the term “Count your Blessings” to describe her journey from corporate sector to the world of church. She is a lifelong United Church of Christ member and deeply involved with Mayflower Community and the MN Conference of the UCC. She has thirty years as an organist/pianist and has been pursuing creative writing over the last 5 years. She enjoys most her adult children and two grandchildren and continues to be transformed by her yoga practice every day. She may be reached at: thechampnine@gmail.com.

“(To remind myself)

Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet. . . .
Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensional life;
stay away from screens, from anything
that obscures the place it is in. . . .

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

Accept what comes . . .”

Wendell Berry
Opportunities

What the social distancing realities will be this summer is unknown, as this is written. Many partner organizations have put their programing on hold until more is known. Others have scheduled “Opportunities” but with the recognition that they are subject to change.

This being so, when making summer plans, please check organization websites and/or contact them directly for the latest, most accurate information.

Online Taizé Evening Prayer
For the last sixteen years, Minnehaha United Methodist Church in south Minneapolis has offered its Second Friday, October to May, service of sung prayers, Scripture, and Silence. With those gatherings no longer possible, so that people can still worship safely from afar, they have created an online Taizé Prayer service.

Here’s the link to the April video:
https://youtu.be/M9UjmarDxY4
A podcast version is available at:
https://www.minnehaha.org/taize.html

They are hoping to release additional Taizé services as they become available. For the latest, check their YouTube channel at Minnehaha UMC, their website at www.minnehaha.org, their Facebook page at Minnehaha Taizé, or contact: kristinammerman@gmail.com.

Casa del Sol at Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, NM
Ghost Ranch has an attractive new website, with new tools, which shows that onsite retreats and workshops are now scheduled to resume in July.

Earlier retreats—like “Guests in God’s House: A Pilgrimage into Interfaith Living,” originally scheduled for June 21-27, to be led by The Rev. Dr. Canon Peg Chamberlin, recently retired CEO of the Minnesota Council of Churches—are under review.

For the latest information about this and other upcoming opportunities: www.ghostranch.org or 877.804.4578 or registrar@ghostranch.org.

City House
City House has announced that Rolf Lowenberg-Deboer, their very able Executive Director for the past four years, has left to become the Field Practitioner for the Social Cohesion Initiative (www.tcsci.org). While a replacement is sought, their core mission—offering spiritual listening to people in our community who are generally unseen and unheard—will continue at their many locations.

Wine & Wit: An Evening with Kevin Kling, an opportunity to sample locally available wines, to learn more about City House, and even a chance to make a modest contribution to its important and caring ministry (originally planned for May 28) will now be on:
Thursday, September 10, 5:30-8:00 p.m.
Sponsored by City House
Held at Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis
(with ample, free underground parking on-site)
For information or registration for this or for information about becoming a spiritual listener for City House: www.city-house.org or info@city-house.org.

Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality

As many know, Sacred Ground’s core ministry is its three-year certification program to become a spiritual director, a ministry of spiritual companionship, of holy listening, of awakening and deepening faith to heal a troubled world.

In addition, it offers enrichment programs for lifelong learners throughout the academic year.

The Welcoming Prayer in Times of Crisis

Many may find the spiritual practice of the Welcoming Prayer particularly helpful in these days. Through its three simple movements, it speaks more to our bodies than to our minds, allowing “us to become vessels of Spirit rather than containers of worry.” It invites us to pay attention to what’s going on inside. When something seems to be happening, take notice:

Movement 1: Feel into/sink into whatever you are experiencing in your body in this moment

Movement 2: Silently ‘Welcome’ that physical sensation knowing that God is present in Every experience we have in human form

Movement 3: “I let go of my desire for security, affection, control, and embrace this moment as it is.”

For an actual experience of Welcoming Prayer, go to two new Welcoming Prayer practice sessions at Meditation Chapel: https://meditationchapel.org:
Every Tuesday: 10:00-10:30 a.m. Eastern Time, facilitated by Mary Dwyer in the Peace Chapel
Every Thursday: 8:00-8:30 p.m. Eastern Time, facilitated by Therese Saulnier, John Main Chapel.

Contemplative Outreach E-bulletin, for 20 April 2020
Sacred Ground Summer Institute
This summer, Sacred Ground will be offering three connected programs that will offer a deep dive into finding one's own unique path through this life journey. Each program will take place through Zoom:

Three Saturdays, 9:00 a.m.-noon
- June 20 - Listening Into Life: A morning of exploration in how deep listening—listening from the heart—brings us closer to our most authentic selves.
- July 18 - The Choices Before Us: Understanding the meaning and power of discernment when it comes to finding your true path.
- August 15 - Embodied Spirituality: Using the body as a tool for spiritual growth and awakening.

For information or registration of this opportunity or about Sacred Ground’s core ministry:
info@sacredgroundspirit.org or www.sacredgroundspirit.org.

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis
The three regular weekly worship services (which were being live streamed before the virus arrived) are continuing: as broadcasts of live worship services, taking place within the church, only now with fewer worship leaders and musicians, socially distanced:
- Sunday Morning (10:30-11:30 a.m.)
- Gathered at Five (Sundays, 5:00-6:00 p.m.)
- Wednesday Contemplative Worship (6:00-6:30 p.m.)

The Sunday morning (9:15-10:15 a.m.) Adult Education classes—taught by Dr. Matt Skinner from Luther Seminary and others—will also continue to be live streamed. And the Sunday Morning Worship will continue to be televised (as far as now known) on WFTC Fox 9 (Sundays, 1:00-2:00 p.m.).

For the Worship Services and Adult Ed (live streamed and archived), go to www.westminstermpls.org and click on “Livestream” (top right on the home page).

“The Mystery: it is all around us, and we do not know it. But sometimes when we give it time and space, whether in deep peace or great anguish— it will come up behind us, or meet us face to face, or move within us, changing the way we see everything, filling our heart with joy and an upspringing of love. . . .”

Mary C. Morrison, in Let Evening Come

For additional information about these and other upcoming opportunities: www.westminstermpls.org or MGage-Finn@wpc-mpls.org.

The Episcopal House of Prayer, and
The House of Prayer in the City
Greetings from the Episcopal House of Prayer community – May you be as well as you can be. Although the House in Collegeville is closed at least through May 30, our mission remains:
- to assist in the ongoing work of discerning God’s voice, both within ourselves and in the world
- provide guidance in the search for wisdom
- teach all forms of contemplative prayer
- offer training in the inner work of the spiritual life

We continue to host a Wednesday evening contemplative sit on ZOOM, that all are welcome to join: www.ehouseofprayer.org/Covid-19

Please also check www.ehouseofprayer.org for chants and teachings, and for sitting practices at three locations when we re-open.

Our Summer Schedule (as of early May):
- Devotional Chant, with Rabi Shefa Gold (June 18-21)
- Kenosis, with Rev. Ward Bauman (July 25-Aug. 2)
- Exploring the Five Wisdoms: Maitri Retreat, with Rev. Daniel Wolpert (August 13-16)

For the latest information and registration: 320.363.3293 or www.ehouseofprayer.org or www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc.

Minnesota Contemplative Outreach
As is widely known, Centering Prayer is a method of meditation from the Christian tradition that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, a practice in which we experience God’s presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself.

Minnesota Contemplative Outreach is a volunteer group dedicated to supporting Centering Prayer practitioners throughout the state. They cultivate and encourage facilitators and other servant leaders by offering (when the times allow) training, sharing resources, and providing enrichment opportunities throughout the year.

Many are surprised by the number of Centering Prayer groups there are throughout the state. Visit their website for full details about these groups, including online gatherings (check with the listed leaders for current meeting status).

One potential upcoming opportunity, well into the planning process is their annual Fall Retreat:
With Grateful Hearts:

Personal Reflections on the Spiritual Journey
Facilitator: Shawn Kafader will use the late Thomas Merton’s stages of spiritual development as a basis for exploring our own personal spiritual journey.

The retreat will offer five conferences: The Gift of the Journey; the Formative Stage; the Transformative Stage; The Dark Night; and The Unitive Stage as a foundation for reflecting on our own spiritual story.

October 16-18, Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo
Online registration is planned to go live in early July. For the latest information: info@minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org or www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org.

Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality
Please Note, our summer programming is, of course, dependent on the current public health situation. Please visit wisdomwayscenter.org, or call 651-696-2788, or email office@wisdomwayscenter.org to receive updates on program schedule changes:

Walking in Harmony (June 12 and July 10)
In the midst of daily challenges and conflicts within our greater communities, cultivating a spirit of harmony and peace is a gift for yourself and the world.

You are invited to walk the labyrinth indoors or outdoors at Carondelet Center, whether this is your first walk, or you are developing a spiritual practice. After a brief opening reflection, you are welcome to walk as often as you wish.

There will be space for writing and artistic play as well as time for quiet prayer and meditation.

also:

Writing the Sacred Journey (2nd Fridays, 1:30-3:30 p.m.)
Monthly drop-in sessions focus on different aspects of writing spiritual memoir: themes that commonly arise, craft techniques, challenges and joys of the writing process, and practices for opening our work to the spirit’s movement.

June’s theme is Compassion and Revision. The roots of both revision and respect mean “see again.” A rough draft is one dimension of a story; when we revise, we honor ourselves and our stories by seeing new dimensions.

Again, please check for the latest information.

Christos Center for Spiritual Formation
“Contemplative Pause” (Wednesdays, 9:45 a.m.-noon)
This “come as you can” group meets virtually on ZOOM for now, and provides a community of contemplatives who support each other’s spiritual path and inner transformation. The morning opens with silent prayer, a brief meditation leading to personal reflection, a 45-minute time of personal silence followed by sharing and closing comments.

Come as often as you can. Open to all. Contact Michael Kassner at mpkassner@gmail.com to get a ZOOM invite. For the latest information on other possible opportunities: www.christoscenter.org or ladonna@christoscenter.org.

Loyola Spirituality Center
Loyola does have an online group: Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters at the End, a book reading group that will meet Wednesdays, May 20-June 10, 10:00-11:00 a.m. This virtual discussion group will tackle matters such as:
- What is important as we age?
- Understanding our choices (medical and otherwise)
- Facing our mortality
- How our faith informs our thoughts and decisions about death and dying
- What does quality of life mean to you?
For registration of this and for the latest information on additional opportunities that may develop: www.loyolaspiritualitycenter.org or info@loyolaspiritualitycenter.org.

The Benedictine Center, St. Paul’s Monastery
Two significant changes are affecting the Benedictine Center at this time. As elsewhere, its programming has been put on hold. And Sam Rahberg, its long-time Director, resigned at the end of April. His steady hand will be missed at the Center. But Sam, and his personal ministry and books, can still be reached through his website: www.samuelrahberg.com.

“Being silent means waiting, waiting for the Other to say something to us. Being silent before God means making room for God, to breath in the will of God, to listen attentively . . .

The time of silence is a time of responsibility, and of blessedness, a time when we live in the peace of God.
‘For God alone my soul in silence waits.’”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Meditating on the Word
In a Sacred Manner

“Grandfather, Creator of all that exists, as this new day dawns, let all people begin anew to walk the Good Red Road of Life.

May we forget our differences, may we remember our likenesses, let us hear what we have not heard, let us see what we have not seen, it is the spark of the Universe, the Oneness of all Life.

In such a way may we be blessed, blessed, in a sacred manner.”

Everyboy, a prayer, posted at All Saints Indian Mission Church, Minneapolis

In a Sacred Manner

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Everyboy, a prayer, posted at All Saints Indian Mission Church, Minneapolis

Space is running out for this issue. Please check with the many other long-establish retreat centers and organizations throughout the region, like:

Franciscan Retreats and Spirituality Center
For the latest information: www.franciscanretreats.net or director@franciscanretreats.net.

ARC Ecumenical Retreat Center, Stanchfield, MN
For the latest information: www.ARCretreat.org or ARCretreat@hotmail.com.

MICAH, Minnesota Institute of Contemplation and Healing, Crookston, MN
For the latest information: www.micahprays.org or trey.crxpath@midconetwork.com.

Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN
For the latest information: www.kingshouse.com or christtheking@kingshouse.com.

Franciscan Spirituality Center
For the latest information: www.fscenter.org or fscenter@fspa.org.

Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict’s Monastery
For the latest information: www.sbm.osb.org or mholicky@csbsju.edu or eantony@csbsju.edu.

Ministry Lab, at United Theological Seminary
For latest information: www.unitedseminary.edu or ministrylab@unitedseminary.edu.

St. John’s Abbey Guesthouse, Collegeville, MN
For the latest information: www.abbeygasthouse.org or spirlife@osb.org.

Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls
For the latest information: www.fslf.org or franciscanlife@fslf.org.

Reading Opportunities:

Our Lady of the Lost and Found: A Novel of Mary, Faith, and Friendship, by Diane Schoeimpelen

What would you think if—staying-at-home, on a fresh spring morning—you had come into your living room with a watering can in hand and found a woman in a black trench coat, with her hair tied back, and with a small wheeled suit case in hand, standing there looking as though she had just come for a visit?

That is just what happened to Diane Schoempele’s narrator. Her unexpected guest is, of course, the Virgin Mary, who is a pleasant and hard-working woman with a heavy workload who feels that she needs to take a break for a week. And she is also completely down-to-earth and practical, soon after arrival cautioning her host not to tell her friends lest her house be surrounded by hordes of people, trampling the flowers, and trying to get Holy Water out of the garden hose.

Our Lady—which was first read when it came out some years ago—is full of information about Mary’s place in history down through the ages, and of insights about faith and about friendship. But it is its imaginative plot with its realistic human details that somehow make Mary more real and the many Miracles associated with her less to be taken with a grain of salt. As the narrator suggests, after some wondering:

“In such a way may we be blessed, blessed, in a sacred manner.”

“Still it is worth trying to understand how the uncertainty principle applies to all areas of thought, life, longing, and faith. It all depends, I suppose, on how comfortable you are with uncertainty, how fond you are of mystery, how willing you are to make the quantum leap that faith requires.”

In a Sacred Manner

“Grandfather, Creator of all that exists, as this new day dawns, let all people begin anew to walk the Good Red Road of Life.

May we forget our differences, may we remember our likenesses, let us hear what we have not heard, let us see what we have not seen, it is the spark of the Universe, the Oneness of all Life.

In such a way may we be blessed, blessed, in a sacred manner.”
**Afterwords:** continued from back page.

This distinction and the scholarship, with names for both parts, was somehow deeply comforting, making what was being experienced feel more legitimate and sound. As time went by, when special situations arose, intercessory prayers, word prayers, began to be added at the end of morning prayers. And this somehow changed things again. What had for some time been a vaguely sensed unease, began to be more strongly felt. That distinction—which had seemed so clear, and comforting—now seemed less certain. Less certain because what happens in the silence of deep centering prayer and what happens in deep word prayer feels pretty much like the same thing. It just seems that somehow prayer is prayer, that—at least at deeper levels—there might not be different kinds of prayer, with different techniques, and perhaps different purposes.

Saying what something is because of how it seems, seems like building on sandy soil. A way out that brings comfort, at least for now, has been to think that there are pathways to prayer, multiple pathways, pathways that lead to prayer itself...to think that words may be a pathway to prayer, that silence may be a pathway to prayer, that music may be for some a pathway to prayer, that experiencing nature may be for many a pathway to prayer...and then to imagine that prayer itself—at least at its deepest levels—may be our opening of ourselves to God’s ready Presence, to God’s unconditional Love... and the consequent opening of ourselves to the pain and the joy of the world.

Remembering Jesus on the Cross, crying out, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’... it might be thought that the words themselves were not the prayer...that the prayer was his opening of his deepest human self to his Father. Remembering Elijah, on the run, sheltering in a cave, waiting for the Lord to pass by, and there came wind and earthquake and fire, and then ‘a sound of sheer silence’... and it might be thought that the listening and the silence were pathways... and that the prayer was Elijah’s opening himself to God’s Presence. Remembering a thin place experience in nature... it might be imagined that it was the opening of oneself to the Beauty and to the Oneness of creation and of the Creator that was the prayer.

These are deep prayers, and deep prayers are rare. Most are just the everyday prayers of ordinary time. But maybe even so. Thomas Keating says that in centering prayer it is ‘intent’ that is essential, that our ‘intention to consent to God’s presence and action’ makes it prayer. And this may be true for all prayer, that our intention to come to God in prayer—even if it may not seem to go very deep—makes it prayer.

During this time when there is more time, thinking back about how prayer has seemed is not offered as being how or what prayer is. Yet, somehow, it does seem that there are close connections here... that close to the center of religious life are prayer... and the opening of ourselves to God’s Presence and Love... and—because of that Love—the opening of ourselves to the suffering of the world and to the joy.

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**Contact Us**

Do you know of anyone—it’s free to all who ask—who would like to receive this ecumenical newsletter?

If you do, please contact Kristin Kieft at news@wpc-mpls.org or 612.332.3421.

If you know of an up-coming Opportunity that would be of interest to other readers, or if you have any other questions or comments, please contact us at: thinplaces_us@msn.com.

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“This much I have learned:
within the sorrow there is grace.
When we come close
to the things that break us down,
we touch those things that also break us open.

This is the healing point:
when we have told the story,
we can leave the story behind.
What remains is hidden wholeness,
alive and unbroken. . . .”

Wayne Muller, *How, then, Shall We Live?*
Afterwords: “Pathways . . .”

A long-time reader, sheltering-in-place, writes:

“A vividly remembered experience, many years ago, started something that gave direction. We had read Open Mind, Open Heart, had found something stirring, and had tried—with many starts and stops—to begin a daily practice of morning centering prayer. The more intuitive of us made progress; but the more type-a found it harder but still, somehow, strongly attractive. A year later, in a small rural church, the pastor began the sermon by asking, ‘How many of you have been in a meeting where someone did most of the talking?’ Virtually every hand went up. Then silence, for ten or twenty seconds: ‘How many of you have been in a meeting where you did most of the talking?’ Fewer hands, with less enthusiasm. Silence. ‘Why did that person do most of the talking? . . . Was it because that person had an agenda? . . . ’

The question struck home, and especially the word ‘agenda.’ Up until that moment—despite having read and re-read the book and having worked at centering—prayer probably had still been thought of as me talking. But ‘agenda’ suggested that ‘my will’ might be at work . . . and suddenly, the possibility of a prayer that was not me talking, or even me listening, but of seeking to rest in God’s presence, seemed to be opening. Something had happened. It felt like a gift had been given. In that unexpected moment, there was a catching up with the more intuitive one. And pretty much every weekday morning since then has begun with twenty or thirty minutes of contemplative worship, still in pajamas, in a special place, a lighted candle, one or two sung prayers from Taizé, centering prayer, and the lectionary text for the day. There are dry spells. Once in a while, it goes deep. Most days feel like the ordinary days of ordinary time. But without it, the day doesn’t feel right.

The new road opening led to more reading. It was learned that scholars have made a distinction between what they have called Kataphatic prayer, which ‘has content and uses words, images, symbols and ideas,’ and Apophatic prayer, which ‘has no content, emptying the mind of words and ideas and simply resting in the presence of God.’ Discovering